The defuser

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Patrick and Margery Godfrey of Federal Way breathed a sigh of relief this month when their youngest son, now 41, finally came home from Baghdad.

Patrick Godfrey Jr. has traveled all over the world with the Army's Explosive Ordnance Division, and while he's thankful for the variety of experiences, he's ready to settle down. Godfrey was a quiet and introspective child. He was born in Hawaii and moved as a child with his family to California, where his parents divorced and his father remarried. Shortly thereafter, his newly blended family moved from California to Federal Way.

He was enrolled at Lakota Junior High (now a middle school), where he played tight end on the junior varsity football team, sang in the concert choir and wrote articles for the school newspaper.

He participated in Boy Scouts, ballet, tap dancing and drama, all on the insistence of Margery. "She was friends with the woman who ran all those things ... I don't know how I got into the dancing and drama except that she asked if I wanted to and I said okay," he e-mailed from Iraq last month.

Godfrey did well in school and was active in extracurricular activities, but things were a bit difficult at home. His step-brother, John, rebellious and strong-willed, began to feel displaced in the family. When he decided to move back to California to live with his mother, Godfrey said he wanted to go, too.

Godfrey attended ninth grade in Lomita, Calif., then moved with his mom and brother to El Segundo, then Redding for part of 10th grade and all of 11th grade in a home study course. It was a difficult transition.

"Ninth and 10th grades, I don't think I enjoyed too much of anything. I was still trying to find myself in my new surroundings and I was just kind of 'there,'" he said. "My mother wasn't very strict and I had a very long leash, so most of the time I hung out with John and did the things he did, like surfing, skateboarding and girl-chasing."

Still, he admitted to having "some amazing experiences that I will cherish for my entire life," including working with a team scuba diving into an 8-foot dredge in the Yuba River as part of a gold mining expedition. That summer, he spent 10 to 16 hours a day mostly underwater, hauling rocks out of a 20-foot deep hole.

"I lived in a tent on a river for three to four months straight while we gold mined," he said. "I hiked and fished daily. I had a trusty Lab named Mike that went everywhere with me." But by his senior year of high school, he had moved back to Federal Way, where he enrolled for his final year at Decatur High School. He didn't do well — he'd fallen behind in his studies in California — and he didn't get his diploma. The future yawned before him. "His teen years, like so many kids, were bouncy," his father said. "He had to choose a pathway — college, work or the military. That's what he saw his choices to be. He went to see a military."

The recruiter told Godfrey if he went into the Army's explosive ordnance division, he could start by September and he'd get to go to Europe, where John was stationed with the Air Force.

"I guess I joined the Army to buy some time, you know, figure out what I wanted to do in life," Patrick said.

About EOD

The Explosive Ordnance Division (EOD) is the unit responsible for finding and disposing of a variety of weapons and explosives — mortars, missiles, rockets, machine guns with ribbons of long, tapered bullets, land mines and the now-ubiquitous improvised exploding devices, or IEDs.

In the field, EOD units generally divide into three-person teams of two members and a team leader.

While they are a division of the Army, in a sense they stand outside normal Army protocol. "Rank means nothing to us. We have the authority to tell colonels no and to politely tell them that if they do not do something we ask, we will simply leave or we will do nothing at all," Godfrey said. "Because everything we do or suggest others do is in the interest of the safety of the EOD team and everyone at the scene, our suggestions are usually listened to. "We always run into the occasional person who wants to flex their 'I'm-in-charge-here' muscle, and that's fine as long as they do what we say."

The EOD teams travel in armored Humvees "and we carry enough explosives and tools to do just about anything," including a remote-controlled robot, portable x-ray equipment and remote control firing devices.

"Our friends are the robot and our explosives," Godfrey said. "I mean, we like to say, 'Any problem in the world can be remedied with a suitable application of high explosives.'"
The teams don't normally scout for explosives themselves. "We respond to items that are found," Godfrey said. "We simply don't have enough people to go searching the country for IEDs and such.

"We take care of things that are found by soldiers out there doing the patrols and searches."
At a scene, an EOD team will send out a robot to identify the suspicious device and place explosives on it to destroy it. Sometimes a team leader will don a 70-pound bomb suit to finish the job, "but that's a last resort," Patrick said.

Team members stay in trailers, sleeping two to a room, and higher-ranking staff stay in a "head shed" located near the team's work building. Members spend their days separated from the rest of the Army, which Godfrey said suits most of the team just fine.

"We've often been called prima donnas by other Army types, and it's true," he said. "I wouldn't be the first to say we are smarter than the average soldier, and what's very different from the Army mentality is that we are encouraged to think on our own. Every one of us has to be able to see and solve problems quickly and make snap decisions."

In the United States ...

While his two decades in the EOD have taken him around the world, some of his most notorious assignments were here in the United States. One of them occurred several years ago, in a remote, wooded area in Montana.

“Two people for our unit in Moffett Field, Calif. were selected by our headquarters to participate in some big deal thing,” he said. “At the time we were chosen, we had no idea what it was for.”

His team met in Washington to be briefed on the mission: The EOD unit was going to help the FBI raid the home of a man named Theodore Kaczynski, dubbed the Unabomber, who was sending explosives through the mail to university professors and researchers. Following the briefing, the team planned to train for several weeks prior to the raid. The training was cut short.

“In the middle of our briefing, the phone rang,” Patrick said. “When our battalion commander put the phone down, he said CNN was giving the FBI two days before they broke the story on the Unabomber raid and arrest operation. Somehow, CNN got word and was going to blow it, so we flew out that night.”

After the raid, Godfrey’s team went into Kaczynski’s cabin to look for explosives. “The inside was extremely organized,” he recalled. “It was very small but it wasn’t cramped, wasn’t dirty and didn’t smell.”

There was a makeshift bed and wool blankets, and most of the walls were covered with shelves with books on organic chemistry, Russian and math. “The hooded sweatshirt you see in the famous drawing of (Kaczynski’s) face was on a hanger,” Godfrey said.

The EOD team found more than 200 pieces of evidence, including a handwritten version of the manifesto Kaczynski sent to several media outlets, a hit list with several names crossed off, map pieces with coded entries for hidden stashes, a pair of shoes with a smaller shoe size glued to the sole, “and last but not at all least, a ready-to-go, full-up bomb under his bunk.”

As part of their duties, the Army deploys EOD teams to the sites of speaking engagements or public appearances in advance of national dignitaries to sweep for explosives and to identify spots where dangerous devices might be hidden.

“They even look in the cups on the golf courses — anywhere a bomb might be,” Godfrey’s father said. “Bomb technology is always moving forward.”

Patrick and his team members attend training seminars every year to keep up with the latest in explosives technology.

Several years ago, Godfrey’s team went to Mexico City to prepare for a visit by former President Bush.

The day after the World Trade Center attacks, the Army sent Patrick’s unit to search for explosives and secure the area in advance of President George W. Bush’s visit. Early the following year, Godfrey flew to Utah to check for explosives before athletes convened there for the Winter Olympics.

When he's home, Godfrey is stationed in Washington, D.C., where he and his wife, Jodi, lived until very recently. They enjoy hiking and camping, but even still, he only gets two weekends out of three off "if we're lucky," he said.

And abroad ...

In Afghanistan, Godfrey served as an EOD team leader. Though the work wasn't terribly intense, he said, it was nerve-wracking. "Oftentimes, you'd find yourself trying hard to stay in the tracks of the guy before you because you know they just ran over that section and it didn't blow up," he said.

His team worked closely with Special Forces and handled a lot of ammunition and unexploded ordnance, but not as much as he'd expected. "I personally only ran on one or two in the seven months we were there," he said.
He experienced much of the Afghani landscape firsthand on a 30-day foot patrol through the country gathering intelligence, questioning local people and checking houses. "It was grueling and at times I felt that it wasn't a matter of if I was going to quit, but when," he said.

Still, they were productive.

His father said Patrick's team found an old prison facility in Afghanistan that housed an arsenal of weapons stockpiled in the cells. There were thousands of machine guns and rocket propulsion devices stacked floor to ceiling and wall to wall, room after room after room, Godfrey Sr. said.

"When all was said and done, during my time in Afghanistan my team destroyed over 129,000 pieces of enemy ordnance that could've been used against our soldiers and coalition forces," Godfrey said. "The other three teams did an equal amount of work on their own."

He said he also enjoyed the hands-on work he got to do with the Afghani people outside of the EOD.

"All the stuff that didn't make the news, like distributing medicines, clothing, paying for and building wells, schools and houses. Everyone would come out to the road when you passed through town and 90 percent of them would wave and yell thank you," he said. "Some would throw rocks and some others would point fake guns and the convoys, but hey, free to express yourself.

"Iraq. Totally different."

Godfrey served as the noncommissioned officer for the EOD unit in Iraq, managing operations for three Army teams, three Navy teams and four Air Force teams across Baghdad. He received reports on IEDs being used in the different sectors and decided how his unit would respond.

"In our first five months here we've run 1,339 missions. Of those, 300 to 400 have been improvised explosive devices," he said. "Our teams are out every day, sometimes all day. We did actually have one day where there wasn't a single call. So far, in five months, I have not had a day where I didn't work most of the day."

The EOD teams had less interaction with the local population in Iraq than they did in Afghanistan, and Iraq has been a more difficult place to work.

“By the time we arrive on a scene, all the people have been evacuated out of the area for their safety and when we’re done, we head back to base with our security team,” Godfrey said. “The enemy over here also places items out in the open to be found and they wait for us to respond before they set them off.”

Godfrey’s Army unit alone went on more than 950 missions in Iraq. With the Navy and Air Force units working with them, they went on 1,880 missions and dealt with more than 70,000 explosives.

They investigated the remnants of more than 150 car bombs that had exploded — “All the car bombs you hear about, we go investigate the scene,” he said — and disposed of more than 20 car bombs before they’d detonated.

Iraq also has proven more deadly than Afghanistan.

In February, Staff Sgt. Kristopher Shepherd, 26, a friend and colleague of Godfrey’s, was killed when an IED detonated while he was trying to dismantle it. He’s survived by his wife and two children in Lynchburg, Va.

Another member of the team, Staff Sgt. Russell Verdugo, 34, was killed in May when a second device detonated while he was disposing of an IED. Verdugo is survived by his wife in Arizona.

A third member of the team was injured twice by shrapnel from exploding ordnance.
On May 19, Godfrey received a bronze star for meritorious service in Iraq. On July 7, he came home.

Ready to hang it up

Godfrey is 41 now. He recently was promoted to sergeant first class, and has almost 20 years in the Army — as many years as he was old when he joined. Now that he’s home, a change of pace beckons.

“After 19 years of playing with the bombs that other people have made, the military ordnance other countries have manufactured and armies employed, three wartime deployments (Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq), I’m ready to hang it up,” he wrote from Baghdad. “I’ve discovered many things that interest me more, like my wife, Jodi, photography and scuba diving.”

He and Jodi are moving to Florida, where he accepted an assignment at Eglin Air Force Base teaching the next wave of explosive ordnance experts. “It’s a good way to end the career,” he said.

“I’m ready to spend my life with my wife, not everywhere else but home. I’ve been on call for 19 years and I hate the fact that I cannot not answer the phone when it rings,” he said. “I can’t wait to just be able to let the answering machine get it. For 19 years, the phone ringing represented a call to duty, a call to respond to a homemade bomb somewhere or some other work-related emergency.”

He said his interest is piqued by the jingle of civilian contractors hiring former members of the EOD to work for $200,000 and higher salaries in Afghanistan and Iraq, but he said he's happy to be teaching in Florida instead.

"The whole thing's just old. It's time for something different," he said. "This'll be a nice change. I'll be home."

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